

Networking to Change Mentalities

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There is a well-known imbalance between the academic training of women and their presence in the business world as entrepreneurs. In general, businesswomen consider that they have enough skills to carry forward their own enterprise but they usually find it difficult to access capital and financial support. In this respect, it is very important to cultivate relations that enable networking, which are often overlooked because other types of relationship, such as family, are given priority. However, being a member of a businesswomen's association makes it possible to interact and become familiar with the difficulties and opportunities of the business sector or territory, learn about other practices, stay up to date with new developments, and strengthen the network of clients, suppliers, partners, and so on. It is, therefore, a key tool for businesswomen to expand their horizons in the personal, work and professional fields.

When young Mediterranean women from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region come from a family environment with a "high socioeconomic status", they possess enviable academic training, study in the best European or American universities and speak two foreign languages with great skill, which places them at a very competitive level in any work environment. But we still do not advance in the socio-cultural field because most of this knowledge acquired stagnates when women have to devote their lives to bringing up a family. Gender inequalities mean losses of 575 billion dollars a year due to the lack of women's participation in the labour market. In Europe, after several European directives in the last fifteen years, along with the national regulations to promote hiring women and improving their

position in economic decision-making, progress is starting to be seen in the big companies and corporations, where gender inequalities have begun to diminish.

Entrepreneurship as Economic and Social Leadership

Many of the actions undertaken throughout the Euro-Mediterranean area are based on the promotion of entrepreneurship to counteract the inequality in business activity in the MENA region, which is led by men by 60%.

However, starting a new business, an enterprise or an individual activity has always had its difficulties. In this respect, businesswomen tend to believe that they have enough skills to



Fe-Male Feminist Organization.

carry forward their enterprise, but their main problem is access to capital and lack of financial support.

Networking: The Key

Economic strength and business success very often come from a good chain of relations and, above all, an intelligent use of these relations. Women do not usually consider that this aspect of social life which nurtures value relationships is a key part of their enterprises or professional

and/or working activities. There are many reasons for neglecting these relations so that sometimes the moment comes when there is no room for interrelational life, which is a big mistake in the socioeconomic environment in which we are immersed.

Belonging to diverse value chains (business associations in the sector or the territory, chambers of commerce, business clubs) seems to be mostly the preserve of men. Therefore, we should not overlook businesswomen's associations, which enable business interaction and provide knowledge and information about the

latest socioeconomic innovations. Neither can we forget that the most relevant are the interactions between participants, which enable them to interact and know firsthand the difficulties experienced by the sector or the territory.

These are not family, work or social interrelations but they provide a niche of present and future contacts with respect to suppliers, clients, partners, and direct or indirect associates; and they are thus a key element in the everyday economic activity which, undoubtedly, at the moment least expected, can provide the opportunity and solution for the development of an enterprise, regardless of its size.

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AFAEMME, the Association of Organisations of Mediterranean Businesswomen, which already comprises sixty-three organisations from twenty-three Euro-Mediterranean countries on three continents, emerged twenty years

ago and is based in Barcelona. We were born with this spirit of interacting and exchanging our best business practices at national and international level since this combination of cultures, resources and ways of doing not only enrich us personally and our environment but create links through the experiences shared in the different projects, forums or debates in which we participate and that endure in time, leading to an ongoing and gratifying range of relational opportunities.

Heralding Gender Equality

The needs and challenges in the different environments of the MENA region are distinct but, undoubtedly, most governments are aware that heralding measures that foster women's inclusion and empowerment in the work and economic environment, as well as highlighting these measures, turn them into more integrating, credible, strong and advanced governments, which benefits all our Euro-Mediterranean societies so that they can be more inclusive and prosperous.